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## Polyphonic Theory and Contemporary Literary Practices

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## Polyphonic Theory and Contemporary Literary Practices

### Abstract

This paper briefly explores some of the ways in which Mikhail Bakhtin reaffirms the principle of the non-identity yet inseparability of theory and practice in literary criticism. The lesson is one which stresses the need to disentangle the critical discourse from idealistic theoretical issues and engage in a materialist practice of criticism. If polyphonic dialogism (especially with respect to contemporary polyphony) is not to be confused with dialectics, then the most urgent and perhaps the most difficult task for the critic facing a polyphonic narrative is to negotiate the text in terms of the socio-historical actuality of the transformation which that text proposes. An analysis of D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel* illustrates the ideological problems that arise when the operative system of the polyphonic narrative structure is stretched to the limit—as is moreover the case with many contemporary novels. And if the critic is to engage in a form of praxis, then he has to re-dialecticize the political (unconscious?) consciousness, in short, to politicize and not merely theorize its anticipated actualization.

### Keywords

Polyphonic Theory, Contemporary literature, Mikhail Bakhtin, non-identity, theory of the non-identity, identity, materialist, materialist criticism, polyphonic dialogism, polyphonic narrative, socio-history, D.M. Thomas, *The White Hotel*, political consciousness, English literature

## POLYPHONIC THEORY AND CONTEMPORARY LITERARY PRACTICES

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Any theoretical discussion presents at least one real danger: The temptation to closet the discussion tautologically and further theorize the theory, thus remaining within a speculative and experimental framework. This would mean having succumbed to the seduction of language, what Jean Baudrillard refers to when he asks whether every discourse is not

secrètement tenté par (l')échec et (la) volatilisation de ses objectifs, de ses effets de vérité dans des effets de surface qui jouent comme miroir d'absorption, d'engloutissement du sens. Ce qui arrive en premier lieu lorsqu'un discours *se séduit lui-même*, forme originale par où il s'absorbe et se vide de son sens pour mieux fasciner les autres: séduction primitive du langage. (Baudrillard 76-7)

secretly tempted by the failure and the volatilization of its objectives, of its effects of truth into surface effects which act as a mirror of absorption, of the swallowing up of meaning. Which occurs initially when a discourse *seduces itself*, the original form through which it absorbs itself and purges itself of its meaning in order to fascinate others more completely: the primitive seduction of language.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Mikhail Bakhtin's work is that it not only proposes a particular interpretation of the world and the study of literature and social sciences as such, but that it also

provides us with some of the guidelines for its transformation. This excites the scholar and indeed seduces. But for the critic who is not so much interested in remaining within the abstract intricacies of theories which can often bedevil the critical discourse, but rather whose prime concerns are those aspects of a theory which he/she can use and refer concretely to the object of his/her activity, i.e. the study of literature—literature in the broadest sense possible, both artistically and socially speaking—then the single most important aspect of Bakhtin's work is potentially in the area of methodology.

I suggest that we take a look at the methodological problem of theory versus criticism, or rather the theoretician of literature versus the literary critic—a problem which, with respect to Bakhtin and from the viewpoint of current literary practices, must be reformulated in the following way: what and how does Bakhtin's work contribute to the study of contemporary literature? The question of textual application can also be problematic, however, because it is still too often today expressed in terms which dichotomize the question into an either/or proposition: On the one hand, is Bakhtin's work a method of textual analysis, that is, a particular way of reading a text or group of texts, or, on the other hand, does it provide a method for critical evaluation?

The relationship between theory and practice is, or should be at any rate, an important concern in literary criticism. Though any critical discourse can be theorized to the extent of being reified, in which case it becomes self-reflective and theoretically meta-referent, literary criticism as a social activity is a practice; more specifically, it is a theoretico-practical activity (Sánchez-Vázquez). What has to be stressed is that the relationship between theory and practice is one of interdependence, the interaction of which constitutes a basic unity. Nonetheless, this must not be the basis for a substitution of identity; theory and practice each enjoy a relative autonomy and their interrelation is not necessarily one of chronology. Though most often theory precedes practice in the sense that it articulates itself in an ideal which prefigures a future practical development—and such would be the immediate purpose of theory—a theory never becomes in practice exactly what it proposed to be at the ideal level. Practice ultimately determines the shape which a theory will take in the actuality of its material transformation. For the critic who engages in the problem of textual application, his/her activity must also entail a query into what a theory contributes to the kind of methodology this implies. Because ultimately, it is the method which will determine whether a given critical discourse leads only to a pseudo-practical activity, i.e. a "theorized" theory, or whether it really gives ground to a praxis. What

then becomes crucial is “not only to offer a theoretical explanation of a reality, the reality of a praxis, but . . . also show under what circumstances the transition from theory to practice is possible in a way that leaves intact their intimate unity” (Sánchez-Vázquez 3).

Graham Pechey offers a distinction between theory and practice in the following terms: theory “*theorizes* the field which criticism practically *negotiates*” (Pechey 77). The putative framework of this distinction involves the identification of a theorized field which, if it is to be negotiable in terms of the transition from theory to practice, must itself indicate or designate a process of transformation—the object of negotiation is always to induce some kind of change. Hence the premise that a discussion focusing on the impact of a theory through its application is a valid argument only to the extent that, in practice, this is negotiated in terms of the (historical) actuality of its transformation within which the transition from the (ideal) abstract to the (material) concrete occurs. Marx argues in the *Grundrisse* that the concrete is the end-result of thought, not its point of departure: the concrete is concrete only because it constitutes the point of concentration of many determinations, the interactions of which can be discerned only through a violent abstraction of the mind. In effect, my initial comparison between theory and criticism is “false” to the extent that a theoretician does not necessarily make a critic, but it is “true” insofar as criticism cannot exist without theory.

Using Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony in literature and in relation to contemporary fiction, I would like to examine some of the ways in which his work potentially suggests a particular methodology: One which not only corroborates the non-identity yet inseparability of theory and practice, but also enables the critic to engage in a praxis. For Bakhtin, polyphony in literature essentially means an attempt to refute the objectification of man through the pluralistic intervention of the dialogue. (By objectification I mean the process of reification by which a character or hero in a text can be reduced to the expression of the author’s exclusive consciousness.) Bakhtin explains that the Dostoevskyan “heroes are indeed *not only subjects of their author’s word*, but subjects of *their own directly significant word*. . . . The hero’s consciousness is given as a separate, a *foreign* consciousness, but at the same time it is not objectified, it does not become closed off, is not made the simple object of the author’s consciousness” (Bakhtin *Poetics* 4). He further specifies that for Dostoevsky, the hero is not

“he” nor “I,” but a full-valued “thou,” that is, another full-fledged “I” (“Thou art”). . . . **THUS THE HERO’S FREEDOM IS**

AN ASPECT OF THE AUTHOR'S INTENTION. The hero's word is created by the author, but created in such a way that it can freely develop its inner logic and independence *as the word of another person, as the word of the hero himself*. (Bakhtin *Poetics* 51, 53) (My emphasis in capital letters, Bakhtin's underlined)

The artistic goal of polyphony is to show the coexistence, interaction and interdependence of several different, relatively autonomous consciousnesses that express simultaneously the various contents of the world, within the unity of a given, single work. The Bakhtinian notion of dialogue is therefore crucial in differentiating *non-polyphonic* or monologic narrative from *polyphonic* narrative. The former can be described as a narrative that exploits the unification of several consciousnesses through the hierarchized interaction of their relationship in function of one, single consciousness. Polyphonic narrative, on the other hand, implies that the unity of several consciousnesses is constituted by their interdependent interaction in relation to each other and each in their relative autonomy in relation to the whole, of which the consequent diversification is the unifying totality (Malcuzyński). In other words, the notion of dialogue constitutes the basic narratologic system that specifies a text within a polyphonic framework. The dialogic quality is the vital constitutive and unifying factor without which the harmonic principle of the polyphonical accomplishment would disintegrate into anarchic cacophony.

With respect to contemporary fiction, there are many novels where the narrative organization of the text is polyphonical, at least in intention and immanently speaking—in fact, it seems to be a particular mode of writing. For instance, Georges Perec clearly indicates the intended polyphonic structure of his novel *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978), when he writes in the “Préambule” that the art of the puzzle

n'est pas une somme d'éléments qu'il faudrait isoler et analyser, mais un ensemble, c'est-à-dire une forme, une structure: l'élément ne préexiste pas à l'ensemble, il n'est ni plus immédiat ni plus ancien, ce ne sont pas les éléments qui déterminent l'ensemble, mais l'ensemble qui détermine les éléments. . . . (Perec 15)

is not a sum of parts to be isolated and analyzed, but a whole, that is, a form, a structure: the part does not preexist the whole, it is

neither older nor more immediate, the parts do not determine the whole, but the whole determines the parts . . . .

This is what actually occurs in a work like *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979) by Italo Calvino. A dialogic structure constitutes the work itself; implicit dialogue intervenes between different narrative segments, both at the level of various "novels-within-the-novel" and at that of several narrators addressing a series of different readers. John Berger expresses differently but deals with the same kind of problem in his *Pig Earth* (1979). I also have in mind, more particularly, another recent work, *The White Hotel* (1981) by D.M. Thomas. What is important with respect to polyphony is that each narrative segment or chapter (as is the case with this last example) represents a different point of view expressed by an autonomous voice, each questioning the credibility of a similar event, symptom or symbol, or even the authenticity of a similar character, in the chapter or chapters preceding it. There is an effective dialogic interaction—intercourse Bakhtin would say—between the various narrative segments, to the extent that there is no effort on the part of the author, D.M. Thomas himself (or of one of his characters), to reconcile and conflate the several different versions into a single, definitive one. Not one single narrator in the novel holds the absolute "truth" about Lisa Erdman, the protagonist, even though each may claim it, implicitly or explicitly, like the character Freud for instance. Such a claim relates to the polyphonic principle of the character being his own subject, not the object of anyone else. In this sense, the condensed and subliminal discourses of the subconscious (chapters I and II) are just as "true" or as "false" about Lisa and her neurosis as is Freud's psychoanalytical explanation (chapter III); as are the more omniscient accounts of Lisa's life during the next twenty years or so, and of her death, including the brief intrusion of the last survivor of the Babi Yar massacre as a character, Dina Pronicheva (chapters IV and V); as is the rather obscure last and sixth chapter; as is, even, the first letter of the "Prologue"—in which the whole novel appears to be synthesized in a figurative way.<sup>1</sup> There is no functional resolution of the various voices and their respective points of views: they all express themselves autonomously according to their specific setting. Within the novel, the recurring symptoms, symbols and events achieve a plurality of meanings through their presentation by simultaneous, different consciousnesses which are polyphonically counterposed in the text, with the effect that it is the ensemble that ultimately deter-



mines the parts. Dialogue is the implicit and constitutive factor that not only unifies the totality but also specifies each narrative in its relative autonomy. Each of these modifies the other and in so doing is itself modified. It is this element of modification and not only the representation of a multiplicity that specifies the polyphonical dialogic accomplishment, the reciprocal transformation of the parts as a result of their interaction. The polyphonic principle does not entail so much a decentered point of view by which the subject is atomized as several, different and simultaneous points of view between which a dialogic dynamism intervenes as the potential for change. The subject is indeed modified as a result, but the process of transformation operates in the actuality of the interaction between the subject and the object (of change), not within the subject alone.

A problem arises, however, when the operative system of the polyphonic narrative structure is stretched to the limit, as appears to be the case with *The White Hotel* and with many other examples of contemporary polyphonic instances. Interpretively speaking, every imaginable combination of modifications and transformations becomes strangely possible, even within the framework of the (polyphonically harmonic) unity of a given, single work. The question which then must be asked is the following: what is the *object* of change and what *kind* or kinds of change does the contemporary polyphonic principle seek to accomplish?

In the "Author's Note" to *The White Hotel*, Don Thomas writes that "Freud becomes one of the *dramatis personae*, in fact, the discoverer of the great and beautiful modern myth of psychoanalysis. By myth, I mean a poetic, dramatic expression of a hidden truth; and in placing this emphasis, I do not intend to put into question the scientific validity of psychoanalysis." This Jungian-like view establishes the cognitive framework of the novel: the subjective cognition of the past, the neurotic symptoms of which psychoanalysis attempts to interpret in terms of the individual subconscious, is represented to be a mythical, collective (un)conscious cognition of the future.<sup>2</sup> This is the object of change in *The White Hotel*. The actual transformation occurs through the representation of various and similar, though never identical symbolic elements, together with the protagonist's physical symptoms. These various elements have several forms and acquire different meanings—as well as different causes and effects—according to the time and place in which they are artistically represented throughout the novel. Here are some examples, beginning with the opening lines of the first chapter, "Don Giovanni":



I dreamt of *falling trees* in a wild storm  
I was between them as a desolate *shore*  
came to meet me and I ran, scared stiff,  
it, I have started an *affair*  
with your son, on a *train* somewhere  
in a *dark tunnel*, his hand was underneath  
my dress between my thighs *I could not breathe*  
he took me to a *white lakeside hotel*  
somewhere high up, the *lake was emerald*  
I could not stop myself I was *in flames*. . . (My emphases)  
(*Hotel* 19)

Among other things, the poem describes a fire, a flood and an avalanche, all of which take place during Lisa's stay at the hotel. This pattern of events is basically the same in the second chapter, "The Gastein Journal," which elaborates on them and provides some extra details. They are interpreted by Freud in the third chapter, "Frau Anna G.," in terms of childhood traumas, including her mother's death in a fire which destroyed the hotel where she was staying, a cold and absent father, a violent street-brawl in Russia to which she was exposed as a fifteen year-old, memories of summer vacations spent on the Black Sea, her unhappy marriage, etc. The train and/or ship journey reappears on various occasions in chapter IV, "The Health Resort," on her way from Vienna to Milan in 1929; from Milan to Como with the Russian opera-singer who was to become her second husband, where together "they drank tea on a hotel terrace, overlooking the sparkling lake and with a backdrop of transparent mountains" (*Hotel* 153); later on, back to her childhood city and summer home which she visits, where "the rambling white house had been converted into a health resort," with "a concrete path down to the tiny cove and beach" (*Hotel* 189); and finally back to Kiev. All these elements take a nightmarish form in "The Sleeping Carriage" (chapter V), in which the tunnel and falling trees become a "long narrow corridor formed by two ranks of [Nazi] soldiers" brandishing rubber clubs and beating up the people forced to go through it. It leads not to a shore or a beach but to the ravine of Babi Yar, where the storm is now a "hail of bullets," the water a "bath of blood," the avalanche the terrifying sensation of being buried alive, the fire the igniting of the victims' hair and the burning of corpses, the love affair, the rape of an agonizing old woman with a rifle's bayonet. Lisa's physical symptoms—a chronic respiratory condition caused by pain in the left

breast and subconsciously in the lower abdominal region—appear during the Babi Yar massacre in the following terms (Lisa has been shot and has just fallen into the ravine):

An SS man bent over an old woman lying on her side, having seen a glint of something bright. His hand brushed her breast when he reached for the crucifix to pull it free, and he must have sensed a flicker of life. Letting go the crucifix he stood up. He drew his leg back and sent his jackboot crashing into her left breast. She moved position from the force of the blow, but uttered no sound. Still not satisfied, he swung his boot again and sent it cracking into her pelvis. Again the only sound was the clean snap of the bone. Satisfied at last, he jerked the crucifix free. He went off, picking his way across the corpses. (*Hotel* 218-19)

When the war was over, “engineers constructed a dam across the mouth of the ravine, and pumped water and mud in from neighbouring quarries, creating a green, stagnant and putrid lake”; the dam burst, burying part of the city of Kiev under mud. Later on, “it was filled with concrete, and above it were built a main road, a television centre, and a high-rise block of flats” (*Hotel* 222). The last chapter, “The Camp” opens up: “After the chaos and overcrowding of the nightmarish journey, they spilled out on to the small, dusty platform in the middle of nowhere” (*Hotel* 226); the camp was “an oasis—green grass, palm trees, sparkling water. And the building itself looked more like a hotel than a transit camp” (*Hotel* 226-27).

This is only a synoptic view of the multiple transformations to which the many recurring elements are subject in the novel. What has to be stressed is that these transformations do not achieve anything, immanently speaking, except to explain and further justify the neurotic illness from which the protagonist suffers. It is only at the end of chapter VI, which can be interpreted as a kind of purgative “after-death” vision, such as the hallucinating product of either total madness or immediate pre-death flash of desire, that the symptoms finally disappear; the novel closes on an eschatological note of optimism. In other words, the means justify the ends: thematically speaking, a historically collective future (chapter V) has been manipulated in function of one individual experience of the past (expressed in chapters I and II, and interpreted in psychoanalytical terms in chapter III) by means of a polyphonic articulation of the present (chapter IV in relation to the preceding and the following narrative segments),

this present temporal framework then being projected into both an atopic future (chapter VI) and a figurative past (the first letter of the "Prologue"). The fascinating aspect of this novel is the remarkable power of the narration and the brilliant use of a polyphonic structure whereby various voices play against one another at different cognitive levels of consciousness. They express themselves in their own independent, socially chronotopic instances, a technique by which both closeness and distance is achieved—subliminal yet analytical with Anna; psychoanalytical yet personal with Freud; intimate yet omniscient with the other narrators, including the testimonial yet fictional with the intrusion of Dina Pronicheva—with the rather innovative effect that, while maintaining their particular discursive specificities, these distinct voices or consciousnesses do not remain isolated in their own directly significant utterance but dialogically interact between themselves in a dynamic intertextuality. What has been absorbed and defused from the whole process, however, is the object that such a narratologic practice mediates in a Bakhtinian sense: the transformation of the (social) system from which it emerges. Quite differently, it serves in the novel to confirm an irreversible state of immutability. The "hidden truth" of *The White Hotel* is its political message: History repeats itself—nothing *can* change except the forms of articulation, of actualization.

In order to further identify this kind of "change," one must include an examination, however brief it may be, of the socio-historical conditions under which polyphony appears. Bakhtin himself points out that the (Dostoevskyan)

polyphonic novel could, indeed, have come into being only in a capitalist epoch. The most favorable soil for its development was, moreover, precisely in Russia, where capitalism's near-catastrophic arrival found an untouched variety of social worlds and groupings which had not had, as was the case in the West, their individual self-enclosedness weakened in the process of the gradual advent of capitalism. . . . In this manner the objective conditions for the essential multi-levelledness and multivoicedness of the polyphonic novel were met. (Bakhtin, *Poetics* 16)

*The White Hotel* was published in Great Britain and in the United States in 1981; socio-economically speaking, the "immediate social situation" (see Bakhtin) of the novel is a society which, for the last couple of decades or so, can be described to be polydetermined. This

must not be confused with the concept of overdetermination, which generally relates to the dialectical interaction between various, sometimes overlapping modes of production in a given social formation. Polydetermination refers to current socio-economic and cultural policies of over-production where the object of production is transformed into a producing mechanism which produces a subject, which in turn has no object except to produce that particular *mode* of production. In other words, the representation or reproduction no longer refers to a distinct object but to the producing activity itself (Deleuze; Guattari). With most contemporary polyphonic occurrences, the social objectives inherent in Bakhtin's notion of polyphony are transformed into a formal subject in the text. Between the two, the dialectical current of dialogue no longer passes through. This "new" subject is polyphony itself, a historically and politically impotent polyphonic grimace, because its social condition is meta-referent self-proliferation, ideologically reinforcing a status quo.

From a linguistic viewpoint, this auto-referential mechanism is what appears to have been picked up by various current theoretical premises, those who claim the existence of a "wandering," multiplied signifier embarking on a quest for the signified(s) from which it or they are in theory allegedly severed. This view has the tendency to ignore the historical determinations of the interaction between the signifier and the signified, and in so doing it also obliterates socio-historical arguments from the critical discourse. The many recurring symbolic elements in *The White Hotel* do not refer to such a "wandering" signifier exploiting the symptoms of a multiplicity, but rather to a system constituted by a given set of similar yet different signifiers, which relate to a set of specific signifieds. The various pairs of signifier-signified are determined by each of their particular spacio-temporal setting within the novel; they are counterpointally counterposed in a polyphonic manner in the text in such a way that each set modifies the other and at the same time modifies itself internally. In fact, the very concept of polyphony does not call so much for a "new" theory of the subject (Kristeva *Poétique* and *Sémiotiké*) as for the serious reconsideration of the (socially significant) relationship between subject and object. The theoretical lesson from Bakhtin relates to a method of literary criticism whose prime concern rests with the historicity of the text, with *those* aspects of the artistic creativity that make the artwork the product of a social activity. To view literary polyphony from within a framework which focuses on the status of the subject alone is to closet the work of Bakhtin in an

“over-theorized” field which ideologically co-opts the initial social premises.

Bakhtin stresses, however, that the polyphonic novel (that is, his Dostoevskyan model) will outlive capitalism. But even though *The White Hotel* exploits all the artistic means of “polyphonism”—multi-leveldness, multivoicedness and multivocalism, plurigenerism, plurilinguism, and so forth—in the sense that the polyphonical principles effectively organize the narratologic system of the text, it is not the polyphonic novel Bakhtin talks about. This underlines the need to disentangle the critical discourse from idealistic theoretical issues and engage in a materialist practice of criticism. “It is no longer enough, if ever it was,” writes Tony Bennett, “to stand in front of the text and deliver it of its truth” (Bennett 235). He further specifies that

a politically motivated criticism . . . must aim at making a strategic intervention within the determinations which modulate the text’s existing modes of usage and consumption. It must aim to mobilise the text, to re-determine its connections with history by severing its existing articulations and forging new ones, actively politicising the process of reading. This requires, from a marxist standpoint, not the development of a criticism, validated by canons of theoretical correctness, but the development of a number of different critical practices aiming at politicising the process of reading differently in different contexts and for different categories of readers. (235)

Bakhtin himself would have agreed to this, because even though he quite rightly stresses that the represented world (the world of the text) can never be identical to the real world it represents, this world nonetheless serves as a source of artistic representation:

we may call this world the world that *creates* the text, for all its aspects—the reality reflected in the text, the authors creating the text, the performers of the text (if they exist) and finally the listeners or readers who recreate and in so doing renew the text—participate equally in the creation of the represented world in the text. Out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source the source of representation) emerge the reflected and *created* chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text). (Bakhtin *Forms* 253)

At the level of the interaction between text and reader, “to recreate and in so doing renew the text” is what I believe Bakhtin means by dialogue. But critically speaking, “to dialogize” is not enough; a dialogic response to the text does not make an active reader and indeed can induce an infinite dialogic de-construction. Dialogue as such is not dialectics, neither in a Hegelian nor in a Marxian sense. Rather, dialectics is to be viewed as the inherent object of the (Bakhtinian) dialogic principle, an object which appears to have been abandoned by much of contemporary literary practice. The relationship between a dialogic principle and the dialectical process is similar to that between theory and practice. It is in this sense that I would take issue with propositions that consider dialectical thought to be the logic of a collectivity which does not yet exist as such (Jameson). Dialogue mobilizes the process of transition from the scattered pieces of a puzzle to the completed image they ultimately represent, and in so doing designates the transformation gradually taking place. It anticipates a collective logic insofar as it exhorts isolated units or consciousnesses to come together and combine themselves to form an ensemble. Dialectics, on the other hand, refer to the collective logic not during the process of transition from (unconscious) logic to (conscious) collectivity, but in the *actuality* of the social transformation this process has achieved.

The most urgent and perhaps also most difficult task for the critic facing a polyphonic structure is to negotiate the text in terms of the socio-historical actuality of the transformation it proposes: to re-dialecticize the political unconscious/consciousness, to politicize and not merely theorize its anticipated actualization.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The letters of the Prologue were written as an after-thought, after D.M. Thomas had finished writing the novel.

<sup>2</sup> In his response to an accusation of plagiarism, with respect to Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* (where Dina Pronicheva's testimony appears), Don Thomas explains that in *The White Hotel*'s Babi Yar sequence, the introduction of Pronicheva as a character was to show that his “heroine, Lisa Erdman, changes from being Lisa an individual to Lisa in history—an anonymous victim”; from “individual self-expression” to “the common fate.” Thomas further explains that “gradually her individuality is taken from her on



that road to the ravine; and gradually the only appropriate voice becomes that voice which is like a recording camera: the voice of one who was there." See D.M. Thomas' Letter to the Editor, (London) *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 April 1982, p. 383. Technically speaking, however, there is no *fusion* of one consciousness into another—which the polyphonic principle refutes—rather, the two, Lisa and Dina, coexist in the text.

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